

White, B. T. (2018) Humans and animals in a refugee camp: Baquba, Iraq, 1918-20. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 32(2), pp. 216-236.
(doi:[10.1093/jrs/fey024](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fey024))

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Deposited on: 11 April 2018

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Humans and animals in a refugee camp: Baquba, Iraq, 1918-20¹

Abstract

When human populations are forcibly displaced, they often take animals with them—and even if they are not accompanied by their own, animals often play an important role in their experience of displacement. This article uses a historical example, the Baquba refugee camp near Baghdad in the period 1918–20, to illustrate the multifaceted role of animals in structuring the experiences of refugees: their living spaces; their health; their economic and affective interactions; the way they were represented to a wider world; their relations with the surrounding population and landscape; and the plans made for them by the camp authorities. It is a history with many resonances in camps today, from the goat barns that are a distinctive architectural feature of Sahrawi camps in Algeria to the economic and cultural role of camels for the inhabitants of Dadaab, Kenya, and beyond.

*

Marching party Refugees arrived Jeloo Camp 50 Men,
150 Women & Children 250 Animals. Weather showery.²

Introduction

When human populations are forcibly displaced, they often take animals with them—and even if they are not accompanied by their own, animals often play an important role in their experience of displacement. But animals feature barely at all in the abundant social science literature and developing historiography on displacement. The *Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* is indicative: an excellent, geographically and thematically wide-ranging survey of the state of the field, it contains only a few passing references to animals (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.* 2014). The editors of *Forced Migration Review* could only suggest one short recent article (Beirne and Kelty-Huber 2015). The little work that does exist on the subject, mainly in the form of ‘grey literature’ such as practitioner handbooks, policy reports, and publicity materials, highlights the importance of animals to refugees’ wellbeing. But it is largely produced—and, we might guess, read—by organizations working with refugees and their animals, rather than academic researchers (UNHCR/IUCN 2005; LEGS 2013, 2014; FAO 2016; World Animal Protection n.d.; Veterinarians Without Borders 2015).

This is missing an important aspect of the human experience of forced displacement, which is particularly visible in settings of encampment, both formal and informal. Camps can be shaped by the need to accommodate animals as well as humans: consider the animal markets and ‘goat barns’ that are a distinctive architectural

¹ The archival research for this article was supported by a small research grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, while a College of Arts and Law undergraduate research scholarship at the University of Birmingham had earlier allowed Tanya Bentley to scope out the available materials for me: I am grateful to both funders and to Tanya. I received valuable feedback on drafts of this article from Sarah Cockram, Michaël Neuman, Laura Robson, and two anonymous reviewers for *JRS*, as well as audiences at a number of seminar and conference presentations.

² TNA, WO 95/5035, war diary of Post Commandant (BAQUBAH ROAD), 25 Oct 1918.

feature of Sahrawi camps in Algeria (Herz 2012: 302-303, 340-347). Domesticated animals can play a range of economic and cultural roles in the life of a camp, as camels do at Dadaab, Kenya (Rawlence 2016), while displaced people's interactions with wild animals can create dangers for both, as in the semi-formal settlements for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, which have brought refugees into conflict with elephants (Schlein 2018). Animals can figure in outsiders' representations of refugees, including hostile ones like MAC's notorious racist cartoon showing a mixed population of shadowy refugees and rats crossing Europe's borders in 2015 (MAC 2015). Refugees themselves may say they are being treated 'like animals' (Neuman and Torre 2017). Graffiti photographed in 2015 near the Calais 'Jungle', a name that itself raises animal associations, said 'France is dog life, England good life' (Smith 2015).

In this article I use a historical example, the Baquba refugee camp near Baghdad in the period 1918–20³, to illustrate the multifaceted role of animals in structuring the experiences of refugees: their living spaces; their health; their economic and affective interactions; the way they were represented to a wider world; their relations with the surrounding population and landscape; and the plans made for them by the camp authorities. Baquba is a very early example of a modern refugee camp, a technology of population management that only really emerged in this period of the first world war as military logistical techniques were applied to displaced populations.⁴ Most displaced people are not accommodated in camps, but Baquba is a good place to start thinking about the role of animals in displacement because it is particularly easy to 'see' the animals there. That is partly because the case is both spatially and chronologically defined: we can see how animals crossed the spatial limits of the camp, and the role they played in its establishment and closure. And it is partly because, as many scholars have noted, refugee camps are closely surveilled spaces (Malkki 1995; Hyndman 2000; Agier 2011). Animals leave their tracks in the documentary record because regimes of surveillance designed to monitor refugees capture animals' movements, too.

The documentary record for Baquba is incomplete. Refugee camps are sites of prodigious documentary accumulation, but even today the documentation they generate typically serves the bureaucratic needs of the organizations running them, whether state agencies, international organizations, or NGOs: there is relatively little scope for refugees' own voices to enter or shape the archive directly, as the vast and constantly updated documentation on the UNHCR data portal shows. Baquba was run by the British military, and the surviving sources are overwhelmingly British and institutional: day-to-day records and regular reports from personnel on the ground in Mesopotamia⁵; bureaucratic correspondence from Whitehall departments⁶; and

³ A more precise transliteration would be Ba^cqūbah. Spellings in British primary sources vary considerably.

⁴ The collocation itself was new at the time: documents cited here use 'refugees camp' almost as frequently.

⁵ The camp was under the authority of the War Office. A number of war diaries have survived: not personal diaries but brief reports on daily activities noted down by personnel in specific posts and places. The most extensive is that of the camp's senior medical officer. The National Archives

published accounts written by British officers or missionaries, including the first commandant of the camp, H.H. Austin, who left Baquba in mid-1919 and published his short book about it the next year (Austin 1920; see also Stafford 1935, Wigram 1920).

These sources are valuable, and cover many different aspects of the camp's life, but it is important to recognize their limitations. Like much modern-day documentation on refugee camps, they give us an understanding of the camp's management from the perspective of its managers, and of wider political contexts from their interactions with political authorities (here, British imperial authorities). But they contain surprising omissions: little if any detail on structures of governance within the camp, for example. They give only an external perspective on refugees' experiences, and have little to say about how the refugees viewed British and British colonial personnel.

Refugees' perspectives, indeed, are almost absent from the British sources. (I have not been able to consult Iraqi archives.) Among the archival sources I located only one document written by a refugee, who was in London when she wrote it.⁷ This near-absence is striking—elsewhere in colonial archives it is quite normal to find documents produced by the 'ruled', such as letters or petitions—and offsetting it is difficult: the refugee archive is by its nature much more fragmentary and harder to access than state archives, and for a historical case a century in the past neither ethnographic fieldwork nor oral history are possible. Among published sources, Austin's account includes as an appendix a nine-page note of thanks from a refugee notable (Austin 1920: 111-119); otherwise, the only refugee narrative that I have found in English is a recently translated memoir by Levon Shahoian, one chapter of which details his time there as a child (Shahoian 2012).

Nonetheless, the available sources are rich enough to allow a fairly detailed reconstruction of how the camp operated. I hope to make two main contributions. One is to interdisciplinary refugee studies, by showing how focusing on animals can give us a fuller understanding of refugees' lives. The other is to refugee history: the history of the refugee camp is poorly addressed in the existing literature.

(henceforward TNA), War Office records (henceforward WO) 95/5238, war diary of Assistant Director Medical Services (Refugee Camp BAQUBAH), from July 1919 retitled SMO, ie Senior Medical Officer. For other reports see below.

⁶ The bureaucratic situation was complex. The camp was under the authority of the War Office, but the civil administration in Mesopotamia in this period was subordinate to the India Office (the occupation having been run from India), and the fullest surviving set of reports on the camp's activities are those forwarded to the India Office by the second director, Lieut.-Col. F. Cunliffe-Owen. The Colonial Office was also involved. These archives are therefore split between the British Library (which holds the India Office records) and the National Archives (which holds the others). Minutes affixed to documents frequently show that they circulated between different departments, as all three collaborated in running the camp, and in defending it from hostile questions in parliament. The Cabinet Office and Treasury also sometimes took an interest.

⁷ British Library, India Office Records (henceforward BL, IOR), L/PS/10/775, Surma [di] Mar Shimun to India Office (14 May 1920).

Humans and animals at Baquba

The refugees, their animals, and the site

When British officers in Mesopotamia prepared to receive some fifty thousand Christian refugees arriving from the north in the final months of the first world war, they knew they were bringing many animals with them, and they chose their site and planned the camp accordingly. The refugees were made up of three roughly equal groups. The first were Armenians displaced from the region of Van in southeastern Anatolia during the fighting between the Ottoman and Russian empires in 1915: in the midst of imperial clash and genocidal violence they had escaped east into Persia. The second were also Ottoman Christians, Assyrians from the Hakkari mountains south of Van. Sometimes referred to by the British as Jelu or Tiari, from the names of individual tribal groups, they had declared their support for the Allies in 1915 and been forced out of their highlands after months of fighting with Ottoman government forces and local Kurdish militias. Syriac speakers belonging to the Nestorian church, they too went east into Persia. In the plains around the town of Urmia in the Persian Caucasus, they and the Armenians joined a third group: Assyrians also, sharing the language and church of the Hakkari group but settled farmers and townspeople integrated into the structures of Persian provincial society. The Hakkari Assyrians were tribal pastoralists with a reputation for autonomy (Austin 1920; Stafford 1935; Wigram 1920; Donabed 2016).

Persia was nominally both independent and neutral, but food shortages, disease, and spillover from the conflict going on around it meant that mortality rates there in 1914-18 were comparable to those in any of the belligerent states. At Urmia, close to the Caucasus front, conditions were appalling. In 1918, as the Russian army demobilized itself following the revolution, violence was widespread, and the three Christian groups—two of them already displaced—fled south. Near Hamadan, at the end of July 1918, they encountered British forces moving north through Persia from occupied Mesopotamia. The British decided to funnel them south away from the front line and work out what to do with them later.

It was the Hakkari Assyrians, as pastoralists, who brought most of the animals: seven or eight thousand sheep and goats and about six thousand larger animals, ‘ponies, mules, cattled, donkeys and camels’. The Assyrian Contingent of irregular troops recruited from the refugees—actually Armenian as well as Assyrian—under British command brought another eight hundred ponies when they arrived in Mesopotamia in mid-November (Austin 1920: 21-22). Accommodating so many humans and animals required a large site, and as the refugees made their way south in groups through the late summer of 1918 the occupation authorities chose one at Baquba, thirty-three miles north northeast of Baghdad.

Baquba was (and is) a provincial town on the left bank of the river Diyala, an important tributary of the Tigris flowing south through central Mesopotamia. An administrative centre known for producing dates and other fruit, the town lay on the

old caravan route north from Baghdad to Kirmanshah and Hamadan, down which the refugees were travelling.⁸ The metre-gauge railway that the British had built out of Baghdad to supply their front line also passed through the town, crossing the Diyala on a wooden bridge. The site chosen for the camp lay across that bridge, on the right bank of the river (Austin 1920: 1-2).

Where the left bank was covered by 'a luxuriant growth of date palms, orange groves, figs and vines', the right bank was uncultivated and, in Austin's description, 'neglected' (1920: 2). The site chosen for the camp was defined by a large loop of the river (see fig. 1). The area so enclosed—a tongue of land half a mile across and over a mile long from west to east—was both accessible and defensible: accessible because the railway ran down its centre to cross the river at the 'tip' of the tongue, but defensible because surrounded on three sides by the river, which was 150-200 yards wide when in flood and sunk between steep mud banks up to fifty feet high (Austin 1920: 1, 47). Along the fourth side, running across the base of the loop, was the ancient but disused Nahrwan canal. West of this, the camp continued over higher but flat ground for another half-mile until it reached a smaller canal running nearly parallel to the first, the 'Uthmaniyya [Othmaniyeh in British sources], 'down which water from the Diala [*sic*] was permitted to flow fairly regularly' (Austin 1920: 3).⁹ This provided bathing facilities for the two-thirds of the camp's population living outside the loop of the river. It also provided water to a large animal enclosure situated here at the camp's southwestern corner.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1. 'Plan of Refugee Camp Baqubah', frontispiece to Austin's book.

The rectangles numbered 1–32 each accommodated roughly 1,250 refugees.

NB—East is (roughly) at the top of the plan. Of the crossed arrows, one points north, and the other shows the direction of the prevailing wind.

The enclosure was not large enough, however, and grazing in the region of Baquba was limited. So a satellite camp was established 25 miles to the east, at Balad Ruz, where four thousand animals were set to graze with a thousand refugees to look after them: a small proportion of Baquba's people, but a much larger proportion of its animals. This grazing colony was unsuccessful, however, losing 1,200 animals in a few months: some were sold, but others died or were stolen. It generated so much friction between refugees and the local population that it was withdrawn to the main camp (Austin 1920: 21)—but tension over grazing would recur, as we shall see.

Animals influenced the choice of site (initially, sites) as well as the layout of the camp, and it depended on animals for its proper functioning from the start. Those

⁸ On the town and province of Baquba on the eve of the refugees' arrival see TNA, Colonial Office records (henceforward CO) 696, Iraq sessional papers, CO 696/1/1: *Baghdad Wilayat. Administration Report. 1917*, pp. 159-170.

⁹ On the extensive irrigation system fed by the Diyala see TNA, CO 696/1/3, *Brief note on irrigation works in Mesopotamia and the operations of the Irrigation Directorate* [,] *Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force up to November, 1918* (printed document, dated Baghdad, 1919). War and occupation had significantly disrupted it: TNA, CO 696/1/6, *Irrigation Directorate, M.E.F. – Administration Report for the period from 6th February, 1918, to 31st March, 1919*, pp. 24-35.

animals not sent off to Balad Ruz ‘were retained for veterinary treatment and transport work in the camp area, and others used for agricultural purposes in the vicinity’. When the camp was fully established and its administration began to provide routine reports on it, they referred explicitly to the ‘Animal Camp’, and monitored its inhabitants almost as closely as they monitored the humans. Within the camp, 120 carts pulled by refugee animals operated each day, and ‘performed most useful work... in the transportation of supplies, etc.’ (Austin 1920: 21-22). Setting the camp up required 3,000 E.P. tents—large tents based on an Indian Army model, 12-15 feet high at the centre and each accomodating four or five families—to be put in place, as well as mat-shelters for bathing places: along the ‘Uthmaniyya canal these ran almost continuously for a mile and a half (Shahoian 2012: 50; Austin 1920: 3). In the first nine months of the camp’s existence some fifteen miles of piping were laid to provide chlorinated drinking water, while sanitation—including ‘large closed incinerators throughout the camp’—was taken in hand by a Sanitary Section of eighty refugees (Austin 1920: 32, 25-6). Getting this infrastructure in place, and moving rations for over 40,000 people around the camp, must have provided plenty of work for 120 refugee carts and the section of ‘R’ Company Supply and Transport Corps whose mules and army transport carts were also involved.¹⁰ In early November 1918, exceptionally heavy rains made the camp’s roads impassable, and a light gauge rail track was laid out along its main thoroughfares, connecting to a supply depot on the railway line. One-ton trucks operated by hand now took over the distribution of daily supplies. But animals of several kinds remained important in the camp, and their health was closely monitored as they entered it.

Entering the camp: medical and veterinary regimes

There were close parallels, and connections, between the camp’s medical and veterinary regimes. When the camp opened, mortality rates among its human inhabitants were desperately high: fifty or sixty deaths per day in October 1918, when its population was around 20,000, and still thirty per day in December, when its population had doubled (Austin 1920: 24). By then the camp was the largest ‘urban’ centre in the region, dwarfing the town of Baquba itself.¹¹ Debilitated and exhausted people in the camp fell easy victim to dysentery, smallpox, and other diseases. By the end of 1918 three field hospitals were operating in the camp. Nursing auxiliaries were recruited from among the refugee women, outpatient dispensaries were established, and an isolation hospital allowed cases of contagious disease to be segregated (Austin 1920: 23-24). The camp had better medical services than surrounding villages and towns: seriously ill patients from Baquba town were hospitalized in the camp ‘as there is no place in Baqubah, for in-lying patients’.¹²

Medical controls of the refugees began before they were allowed free access to the camp, and aimed to strip them of their closest animal companions: lice. Louse-borne typhus killed tens if not hundreds of thousands in the Middle East during and after

¹⁰ I would like to thank Jonathan Boff and Twitter user @researchingww1 for elucidating Austin’s reference to “‘R’ Company S. and T.”

¹¹ Baquba town had 3,318 people in 1919. TNA, CO 696/2/7, *Administration report of the Diala Division for the year 1919*, p. 21.

¹² CO 696/2/7, *Administration report of the Diala Division for the year 1919*, p. 29.

the war. New arrivals passed through a barbed wire detention section that could accommodate 2,000 people at a time. Alongside a small hospital, it contained bathing sheds and an area where the refugees themselves as well as their clothes and bedding could be disinfected. Only then were humans given entry to the open sections of the camp (Austin 1920: 22-23). Mosquitoes too concerned the camp authorities: as it was being set up, the medical officer noted that 'Anopheles are plentiful; memo re universal use of nets'.¹³ Systems of medical surveillance for the entire human population were put in place throughout the camp's residential 'sections', and the medical state of the refugees was closely monitored and routinely reported on by the camp authorities for its whole existence.

Veterinary regimes for animals in the camp mirrored human medical regimes. Animals were subject to inspection on their arrival at the camp, whose personnel included a military veterinary officer and staff for at least the first year of operation (Austin 1920: 18). The layout of the whole camp incorporated measures to contain and eliminate animal disease, in the form of segregation paddocks, the animal equivalent of the isolation hospital. Among equids, including the ponies of the Assyrian Contingent, glanders—an unpleasant contagious disease—was quite common; so too was mange, and 'many animals had to be destroyed to stamp out these diseases' (Austin 1920: 22). Veterinary surveillance of animals continued throughout the camp's existence. They needed to be kept in good health, as they were crucial to its life, including its economic life.

Animals in the economic life of the camp

Running the camp at Baquba was, in the words of a hostile observer in the British parliament, 'fantastically expensive'.¹⁴ Austin, writing in early 1920 after his return to England, put the cost at 'several millions of pounds sterling up to date'—ie, barely eighteen months from its creation (Austin 1920: 102). In November 1919 the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave the camp's running costs to Cabinet as '£6,500 per day, or no less than £2,372,500 per annum', with per capita costs more than double those at the Port Said refugee camp in Egypt. But he viewed this as a British responsibility: 'it must be conceded that it is unreasonable to ask the Arab taxpayer to pay towards the maintenance of these refugees a sum equal roughly to 2/3 of the total revenue of the country'.¹⁵ This point bears repeating: the cost of supporting the camp (population just under 50,000) was equal to two-thirds of the entire revenues of the civil administration of Mesopotamia, whose population numbered some three million. Little wonder if the local population resented the special treatment the refugees received from the British.

In these circumstances it was imperative to make the camp *look* as if it was paying its way, or might one day do so. It was also important to counter the claim that Britain was maintaining the refugees in idleness, a claim that even sympathetic observers

¹³ TNA, WO 95/5238, war diary of Assistant Director Medical Services, 29 August 1918.

¹⁴ TNA, FO 371/6356, fols. 252–254: 'Maintenance of Assyrian, Armenian and Russian refugees' (cover 28 Feb 1921), a file responding to a parliamentary question from Sir J.D. Rees.

¹⁵ TNA, Cabinet Office papers (henceforward CAB), CAB 24/93/2: 'Refugee Camps at Port Said and at Baqubah in Mesopotamia. Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 11 Nov 1919.

made (Stafford 1935: 38). In the eyes of the British authorities, animals had a key part to play in stimulating economic life in the camp—and, we might add, in turning the refugees into rational economic subjects in the classical liberal understanding.¹⁶ They set up five poultry farms and a piggery in the camp, not just to provide animal protein (though, no doubt, intended to do that too) but to provide saleable commodities: eggs, meat, and perhaps feathers, for commercial exchange both within and outwith the camp. A central bazaar for refugees to trade among themselves and with outsiders was quickly established (Austin 1920: 29), as was a butchery.

Not all the refugees were cash-poor when they arrived at Baquba, and many had some form of access to cash once they got there. Refugee men sent out to work for the civil administration (mostly as labourers) or for private enterprises were paid cash wages; so were some of those working within the camp, like the men and boys of the Sanitary Section. The men of the Contingent received military pay. Thousands of people were employed within the camp by the American Persian Refugee Commission: over 300 women sewing garments and 4,500 ('chiefly women and children') making woollen yarn and quilt. The American payroll ran to 12,000 rupees per week, 'all of which went into the hands of the refugees' (Austin 1920: 38-39).

The role of animals here is sometimes a plausible guess: it seems likely that the APRC got fleeces for the yarn from the refugees' own flocks, forexample. But more often it is explicit, and documented. Each of the Contingent's four battalions contained one mounted company whose men provided their own horses (Austin 1920: 42). The camp sent animals as well as humans out to work: in March 1920, the director's report noted that 'A party of 2500 persons and 1000 animals were sent up to the Mosul area for employment under the Labour Directorate on terms advantageous to this Camp.' Other groups of working people and animals sent out by the camp that month included 'a party of men and oxen for a private farm near DALTAWAH', and Cunliffe-Owen also mentioned that '[t]wenty five skilled men have been sent in for employment on the Baghdad Dairy Farm', making use of refugees' animal expertise, if not their own animals. Sources of revenue for the camp also included hire of ponies and sale of dairy produce.¹⁷ Efforts by the British to engage the refugees in productive labour and to stimulate commercial exchange depended heavily on animals.

The refugees had their own 'animal economy', of course, especially the Hakkari Assyrians as semi-nomadic pastoralists. The several thousand kids and lambs born in early 1919 would be left at the camp each day as men and boys took the flocks out to graze. 'Towards nightfall,' Austin wrote, 'on the arrival of the returning flocks, such a bleating and clamour by parents and children arose as to be almost

¹⁶ TNA, FO 371/5125, fols. 82-85, 'Memorandum regarding administration of Refugee Camp at Baqubah' (n.d., but forwarded to London and Delhi by the Office of the Civil Commissioner, Baghdad, on 27 Dec 1919).

¹⁷ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, 'Refugee Camp, Baquba. Monthly report. For the month of March 1920' (31 Mar 1920). More Armenians were sent to work at a dairy farm at Shahraban the following month. A dairy farm is also mentioned in later reports as operating in the camp.

deafening' (Austin 1920: 88). His lyrical and admiring depiction of the scene makes clear that the lives of the Hakkari Assyrians were intimately bound up with their animals:

The women and girls were extraordinarily dexterous and quick in drawing the milk from a struggling sheep or goat; and the men, too, evidently knew each mother and its own particular lamb or kid, despite the numbers, with unfailing certainty... Both men and women would frequently bestow resounding kisses on the muzzles of the milch animals and their offspring throughout the proceeding, and a holy calm would temporarily descend upon the scene when each mother and child were united again for the evening meal prior to being driven into their enclosures for the night (Austin 1920: 88-89).

This description takes us beyond the economic. Austin states that the Hakkari Assyrians were 'fully alive to [the] market potentialities' of their flock: sheep's milk 'found a very ready sale throughout the camp and was utilized also for purposes of barter with the Arabs in exchange for eggs, vegetables, and other commodities' (Austin 1920: 90-91). Small groups of refugees would leave the camp before dawn to do the rounds of neighbouring villages. But, while animal products were economically important for the refugees, it is equally clear that animals played an important affective role in the refugees' lives—and, indeed, in Austin's own. He mentions that he frequently encountered Assyrians and Armenians out selling their goods 'during the course of my early morning rides out into the country, miles from camp' (1920: 90). Austin, a career officer of thirty years' service, is reticent about his own demanding and sometimes dangerous life in the camp. Only in passing does he mention that he had been on campaign in Mesopotamia for nearly three years before assuming command of the camp (1920: 56)—and had left his wife and three small children in England (1920: 64). This allusion to early morning rides is the only reference to any leisure activities of his own in the camp. It is not unreasonable to surmise that being on horseback mattered to Austin's wellbeing, for the exercise and for a form of companionship outside his responsibilities as camp commandant.

Animals in representations of the camp and its people

Austin's idealized depiction of the returning flocks raises another important point: the role animals play in representations of refugees, and refugee camps. It is striking that Austin's book, like other British sources, overwhelmingly concentrates on one of the three large and roughly equal groups of refugees at Baquba, the Hakkari Assyrians. Not coincidentally, these were the pastoralists to whom most of the camp's animals belonged. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European visions of the Middle East commonly juxtaposed an idealized and 'authentic' pastoral lifestyle, whether of the Bedouin or of the Assyrians, with an urban lifestyle depicted as corrupted by modernity (a dichotomy also taken up by Middle Eastern nationalists). Representations of Middle Eastern Christians particularly stressed this, often by way of allusions to the region's biblical past.¹⁸ Another British memoir, by the officer Wallace Lyon, describes the Hakkari Assyrians in their homeland as 'an isolated remnant of the past', comparing their march south with their animals and possessions to the flight of the Israelites out of Egypt—and comparing them

¹⁸ I am grateful to Laura Robson for stressing these points.

favourably to the 'emasculated Christians of the Mosul plain' (Fieldhouse 2002: 80, 81). It does not mention the other refugees at Baquba.

Where a given population was perceived to lie on the axes of timeless/modern, pastoral/urban, apolitical/nationalist correlated closely with imperial powers' perceptions of its amenability or otherwise to imperial rule. The Urmia Assyrians were suspect, and the Armenians even more so: despite the strong philarmenian current among European and American publics, Ottoman Armenians often raised imperial government's suspicions because as an urbanized and highly educated population they were perceived to be prone to revolutionary nationalism, even Bolshevism. One occasion where Austin's book (1920: 46-49) does give sustained attention to the Urmia Assyrians and Armenians at Baquba demonstrates this. It details the disbanding and disarming of their respective battalions within the 'Assyrian' contingent because their men had refused full enrolment in the British army, believing this meant a loss of control over their deployment. Austin attributed their opposition to 'some undercurrent of intrigue' (1920: 46). The Urmia battalion was disbanded without incident, but the disarming of the Armenians was a moment of high tension, with British troops armed and waiting out of sight nearby in case they mutinied. Meanwhile,

The independent, freebooting mountaineers exhibited no such distrust of our good faith, cheered lustily when called upon to sign, and professed their willingness to go anywhere and do anything if accompanied by their British instructors. (Austin 1920: 46)

Whether the Hakkari Assyrians were really more amenable to imperial rule is questionable: they certainly were not apolitical. But Austin's account represents them as a timeless and apolitical pastoral population, deserving of sympathy and support, and it uses their closeness to animals as a literary means to this end: they not only greeted their flocks with affection and 'a holy calm', but also gave up their own blankets to keep the lambs and kids warm (Austin 1920: 89). In a book published by the Faith Press, these scenes can reasonably be read as implicit evocation of the shepherds and stable of the nativity story. Elsewhere, Austin would stress the close companionship of Assyrian men and their horses. Humanitarians often represent refugees as, in Liisa Malkki's famous words, 'speechless emissaries' (1996). In these depictions, I think, animals are made to speak for them.

Animals as a source of tension between refugees and hosts

Animals may have offered emotional sustenance to refugees and Austin alike, but they could also figure in human unhappiness: not just in the itching or disease of someone infested by lice, or the injury of someone kicked by a mule, but in disputes between humans. As we have already seen, clashes over grazing were a perennial source of tension and sometimes violence between the inhabitants of the camp and the population of Diyala. This was a feature of camp life from the start. As noted above, when the Baquba camp was established, grazing land was in such short supply that 4,000 animals and 1,000 people were sent out to a subsidiary camp twenty-five miles away, but friction over grazing and reported theft of animals led to their return. At Baquba itself, however, there were also problems. In early summer

1919, as the winter rains ended and hot weather set in, grazing rapidly ran short near the camp, and Hakkari Assyrians took their sheep far and wide in search of it.

At this time, too, the young crops sown by the Arabs in the neighbourhood were rapidly maturing; and there is little doubt that some of the men and boys out with different flocks did not exercise proper control over the movements of their sheep and goats, whilst grazing in the vicinity of crops... [S]everal serious fracas resulted some distance from camp between Arab and Assyrian, owing to the former setting upon the careless attendants of offending flocks (Austin 1920: 86-87).

Before this time thousands of sheep and goats had been set to graze west of the ʿUthmaniyya canal, at first accompanied by small ‘colonies’ of refugees outside the camp proper, with shelters for their families and enclosures for their flocks, to bring them closer to the grazing grounds. But these now had to be broken up and brought back to the outskirts of the camp (Austin 1920: 87): a step taken to prevent not just theft but also bloodshed.

Austin placed responsibility for the tension with the local inhabitants: whereas the Assyrian herders were only ‘careless’ (it was their *animals* that offended), Arabs appear here, as elsewhere in his account, as ‘thieves’ and ‘would-be sheep-stealers’ (Austin 1920: 87). Writing ‘an account of work on behalf of the persecuted Assyrian Christians’ for publication by a missionary press, he was keen to present a positive account of Assyrians. But unpublished British sources show that refugees too could be responsible for friction. The civil administration’s 1919 report on Baquba district mentions charges laid and/or compensation paid for crimes against travellers and neighbours including murder, robbery, and theft, as well as complaints that refugees ‘interfered [*sic*] with the water supply and bunded the canal in various places.’¹⁹

There were clearly multiple causes of tension between refugees and the surrounding population. Not the least of these was the refugees’ close relationship with the occupying power, as evidenced by the lavish British support for the camp. The British viewed the Christian refugees as allies and instruments in their efforts to institutionalize imperial rule in Mesopotamia. And this leads us to a final way in which animals figured prominently in the interactions between the refugees and the population at large, as the occupation zone was transformed into the modern state of Iraq: in military action.

Animals and refugee military expertise

The British recognized the refugees’ military potential as soon as they encountered them in Persia during the war. The four battalions of the so-called Assyrian Contingent were formed then, in summer 1918, not just to defend the south-bound parties of refugees but to assist British operations against Ottoman forces. When they were brought into Mesopotamia they were maintained as a military formation. Two of the four battalions were disbanded in January 1919, leaving two battalions of Hakkari (or ‘mountaineer’) Assyrians. As British officers and NCOs were demobilized, these were combined into ‘a species of double-battalion under one Commander, in

¹⁹ TNA, CO 696/2/7, *Administration report of the DIALA Division for the year 1919*, pp. 21-32

order to reduce the British staff' (Austin 1920: 50). The Contingent was increasingly expected to guard the camp, as British and colonial troops were withdrawn. In theory, they would also serve as an armed escort whenever it became safe for the Hakkari Assyrians to be repatriated to their homes.

This never happened, notwithstanding British aspirations (Cunliffe-Owen's official title as head of the camp was actually 'Director of Repatriation'). But the men and horses of the Assyrian Contingent did go north, in arms. In the late spring of 1919, plans were made to repatriate the Hakkari Assyrians northward, by train as far as the railhead at Baiji about 150 miles north of Baquba and then across country to Mosul and Amadia. These plans were interrupted when unrest broke out among the Kurds in the north of the occupation zone, around Sulaymaniyya, making the region impassable to the refugees and necessitating a British military response. The disturbances ran on into 1920, and the 'Mountaineer Battalion' was involved in their repression. By this time Austin had given up his command and returned to England, but he quotes from a letter sent to him by a former subordinate who commanded the battalion in action. This was full of praise for the Assyrians, who were 'especially good at picketing work and generally showed much natural knowledge of the guerrilla fighting necessary in this type of very mountainous country.' Of greatest value, however, was the squadron of mounted Assyrians, 'as the horses could go anywhere, thanks to their original mountain training; also they have throughout kept in top-hole condition' (quoted in Austin 1920: 53-55). Horses had been essential to the British military effort in the first world war, in a range of roles from combat to logistics and across all theatres (Singleton 1993). In Mesopotamia, after the war, they were key to the refugees' military usefulness for the British.

By the summer of 1920 a 'Forward Movement' of the Hakkari Assyrians from Baquba to the north was again in process, and plans were also being made to move the Armenians from the camp down the Tigris to another camp at Nahr al-^cUmar near Basra, from where they could be transported by sea via Suez and the Straits to the Black Sea coast of eastern Anatolia. The camp's population was shrinking rapidly. But these plans were again disrupted by the outbreak of violent unrest, this time among nomadic and settled Arab populations across central Mesopotamia, including the area around Baquba.²⁰

The great revolt of 1920 shook British control in Mesopotamia, and led to a wholesale revision of Britain's plans for incorporating the region into the British empire. Repressing it cost £40m sterling and the lives of several hundred British and Indian soldiers; up to ten thousand Iraqis were killed (Tripp 2007: 43; Cleveland 2004: 205). Faced with costs like these, the British government decided to move away from an expensive colonial occupation and towards indirect rule within the League of Nations mandate system, with an Arab government under Faysal bin Husayn, recently expelled from Syria by the French. Replacing costly garrisons of British and Indian troops would be RAF squadrons—imperial rule by aerial

²⁰ TNA, FO 371/6359, fols. 80-87: 'Armenian and Assyrian Refugees in Irak' (cover dated 22 Dec 1921), including a printed document *Further Memoranda on the Armenian and Assyrian Refugees in Mesopotamia* (fols. 82-87; only dated 1921 on front cover).

bombardment—and a cheap local force operating as a kind of militarized riot police: the Assyrian Levies, recruited among the refugees (Robson 2016).

This force had its origins in the Assyrian contingent at Baquba, but British plans for it were revised sharply in the summer of 1920. As the revolt spread, the town of Baquba itself became too dangerous for the British political officers based there. When the revolt reached the town on the afternoon of 12 August, they swiftly retreated into the nearby refugee camp.²¹ With the town and its surrounding area in revolt, the *camp* became a bastion of British military authority. It was defensible, though by no means invulnerable: ‘no armament had been allotted for camp defence’; it had an 11,000-yard perimeter; the river, at the height of summer, was low and easily fordable; and, wide and deeply sunken though the river bed was, it did not prevent insurgents armed with rifles from firing into the camp, causing ‘many casualties, especially in the hospital and among the animals’.²² Eventually the land in the loop of the river was evacuated, with the remaining population moving to the higher ground between the canals.²³

The refugees, though, remained loyal to the British; and with the occupation’s British and colonial troops heavily overstretched, the authorities were quick to exploit their potential as a reservoir of military force. The camp, with its railway line and its siding, became a supply depot, and its sixty remaining ox-carts were put to logistical use alongside many of the inhabitants. Meanwhile, the occupation’s counter-insurgency tactics in central Mesopotamia relied heavily on armed and *mounted* refugees. The initial problem of too few (or too unreliable) weapons and too little ammunition was overcome by a train sent north from Baghdad with more. The railway line was cut a few miles south of the camp and the train derailed, but a squadron of mounted refugees rode out to bring in the arms and ammunition it carried. ‘Having received the above, offensive measures were at once undertaken by the refugees, villages and crops burnt, parties of the enemy dispersed, rifles and live-stock captured.’²⁴ The following day (15 Aug), Cunliffe-Owen warmly commended the refugees for burning down four villages in one morning.²⁵ These, presumably, were villages where Assyrians and Armenians from Baquba had bartered curds and whey for eggs and vegetables, and where Austin had ridden his horse in the early mornings of the previous year.

Closing the camp

Mounts were so readily available for the refugee irregulars precisely because the

²¹ TNA, CO 696/3/3, *Administration Report of the Diyalah Division for the year 1920*, p. 2.

²² TNA, FO 371/6359, fols. 82-87: printed document *Further Memoranda on the Armenian and Assyrian Refugees in Mesopotamia*, fol. 86 recto.

²³ The (printed) CO and FO documents above were written after the events. A blow-by-blow account of the situation in the camp during the revolt can be found in BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, ‘Monthly report on the refugee camps for the month of August 1920’ and associated documents also forwarded to the India Office from the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad. All of these sources inform the following paragraphs.

²⁴ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, ‘Monthly report on the refugee camps for the month of August 1920’.

²⁵ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, Cunliffe-Owen, Message to Baghdad by C/O Flight-Lieut Desoer., R.F.A. [*sic*—RAF], 15 Aug 1920.

revolt broke out as the British were attempting again to close the camp. Animals were critical to any plan for its closure, because emptying the camp and moving its population elsewhere depended on assembling sufficient pack and draught animals to carry its inhabitants or pull their carts over long distances away from the railway. Their resettlement, wherever it eventually took place, would also require the provision of animals to allow them to work the land, lest they be resettled into penury and starvation. Austin had noted early in 1920 that 'They will have to be provided with oxen and ploughs to put their fields in order' (Austin 1920: 103); around the same time, Armenians in Baquba rejected a plan for permanent resettlement in northern Iraq whose main start-up costs would have been 'outlay on stock and the opening up of irrigation canals'.²⁶ The Hakkari Assyrians were keener to move on, as the plan at this time was for them to return home. Still, Cunliffe-Owen stressed the complexity of the task:

The arrangements for martialling [*sic*] the people, the allotment of the various animals, the supply of such arms equipment and clothing as are available and the future needs of refugees when they leave the camp, have all presented problems not easy of adjustment nor of carrying into effect with continuity.²⁷

The monthly reports Cunliffe-Owen started compiling in January 1920, and the weekly reports they replaced, therefore kept a precise record of the number of animals in Baquba at any one time, along with detailed information about their health—not the sheep and goats, nor the poultry, which were irrelevant to this purpose, but pack and draught animals. Assessing and where possible improving the condition of the inhabitants of the 'Animal Camp' was a necessary part of preparing for the closure of the camp itself. So was acquiring more animals from the civil administration: corrals and exercise paddocks had been prepared for these animals at the start of the year, when protection against the cold was also arranged for the cattle—though '[t]he getting rid of really useless animals is now however being more strictly enforced'.²⁸ While waiting, the animals were also used for transport and ploughing at the camp.²⁹ At the end of March 1920, for example, there were 24 horses, 1,706 mules, 440 ponies, 296 oxen, 536 bullocks, 194 cows, and no 'donkies' [*sic*] in the camp (the only donkey had died).³⁰ Despite Cunliffe-Owen's claim that acquiring sufficient animals was difficult, the following month saw a significant increase to a total of 4,920, well over fifteen hundred more—largely mules required

²⁶ TNA, FO 371/6359, fols. 82-87: printed document *Further Memoranda on the Armenian and Assyrian Refugees in Mesopotamia*, fol. 84 verso.

²⁷ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, 'Refugee camp, Baqubah. Monthly report for the month of April 1920.' Later, a thousand Assyrian families who had not wanted to participate in the Agha Petros plan and had instead been resettled near Dohuk and 'Aqrah late in the year 'suffered from the poor quality of some of the animals supplied to them and from difficulties in feeding them'. TNA, CO 696/3/6: *Administration Report of the Mosul Division for the year 1920*.

²⁸ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, weekly reports collected under minute paper 'Mesopotamia. Baqubah Camp. Weekly reports 29/12/19 – 12/1/20'.

²⁹ TNA, FO 371/5125, fols. 92-109: 'Conditions in Refugee Camp at Baquba' (cover 22 March 1920), including the monthly report for January.

³⁰ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, 'Refugee Camp, Baquba. Monthly report. For the month of March 1920' (31 Mar 1920), schedule D.

for repatriation. Pack saddles were being manufactured in the camp (it would eventually produce seven hundred a week); meanwhile, 'An outbreak of rinderpest among the slaughter cattle has been dealt with.'³¹

This accumulation and management of animals created a pool of potential military steeds and beasts of burden, just as the camp's human inhabitants were a reservoir of potential military recruits. They were too useful *not* to be used. When Austin noted that on the outbreak of Kurdish unrest in 1919, 'All transport that had been ear-marked for the transport of the refugees from rail-head was immediately required for the difficult operations being undertaken' (1920: 52), he was referring to the camp's animals. Similarly, when the revolt began in the summer of 1920, the up-to-date tables detailing the number and condition of animals in the camp meant they could be readily allocated to military purposes, whether they were oxen in logistics or horses and ponies in counter-insurgency.

The 'forward movement' interrupted by the revolt was resumed in the autumn of 1920, but proved unsuccessful. Thereafter the British abandoned their plans to repatriate the Assyrians to their homelands in Hakkari and the Caucasus. The Armenians of Baquba had already been moved on, before and during the revolt, to Nahr al-ʿUmar; most eventually left Iraq, some for Egypt, and some, it seems, for the Soviet Caucasus.³² Most of the Assyrians, however, were resettled in northern Iraq (though some remained at Baquba into the late 1920s). When the British imperial presence in what was now Iraq reconfigured itself after the revolt, it incorporated large numbers of refugee men into the coercive forces of the British mandate, as the Assyrian Levies. This would have serious consequences for their community soon after the mandate came to an end and Iraq gained its nominal independence in 1932: the Assyrians' experience of forced displacement, with their animals, would continue in the 1930s (Robson 2017; White 2017).

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Conclusion

This history of Baquba refugee camp has argued that to understand the way the camp worked and the lives that refugees lived in it, we must take animals as well as humans into account. The siting and spatial organization of the camp were partly determined by the need to accommodate animals. Medical regimes for the people began by eliminating lice. The construction and internal operation of the camp depended on animal-drawn carts. Efforts to stimulate economic activity, and fend off the perceived apathy and dependence that were coming to be described as a 'refugee mentality' (Stafford 1934; Malkki 2002: 356-359), were built around animal products and animal labour. Animals figured in the affective lives of the refugees, and probably that of the camp commandant too. They also mediated the refugees' interactions with the people they lived among, whether in peace (sale and exchange

³¹ BL, IOR/L/PS/10/775, 'Refugee camp, Baqubah. Monthly report for the month of April 1920.'

³² For Batumi ('Batoum'): TNA, FO 371/6359, fols. 34-39, minute paper 'Armenian Refugees in Irak' (7 Dec 1921) and enclosed documents.

of animal products), tension (friction over grazing), or war (mounted refugees serving as the iron fist of British repression). Any plans to close the camp and repatriate or resettle the refugees likewise depended on animals—but that is what made those plans so prone to disruption at times of (British) military need.

Given the limits of the available sources, it is a partial account, though hopefully not a biased one. It covers only those animals the sources mention, so wild animals barely figure: Austin appears to have been blind and deaf to birds, for example, and the only other wild animals he mentions, in passing, are jackals (1920: 83, 85). The same point applies, as far as I can tell, to Cunliffe-Owen's reports and other British archival documents on the camp. Lice and mosquitos are mentioned, and a rare Assyrian source—the vote of thanks by Quasha Yokhannan Eshu reprinted as an appendix by Austin—notes that compulsory hygiene measures included sweeping flies out of the tents every morning 'when they were benumbed by cold', to be 'gathered in a rug and thrown into the incinerator' (Austin 1920: 114). But cockroaches, rats, and other animals that humans consider pests are not discussed, though they were surely present. Perhaps most surprising, given that the Hakkari Assyrians were pastoralists, Austin never mentions dogs in the camp, nor any other companion animal—except when describing the refugee children at their English lessons 'reading simple sentences consisting of words of three or four letters, such as "The cat is bad," "A dog has legs," etc.' (1920: 94)

Other things are missing too. The British sources say little about the nature of animal ownership, and whether there were differences between British and—perhaps collective and tribe- or clan-based—refugee conceptions of it. This would be key to understanding not only the economy of animals at Baquba but also their cultural meaning, as work on modern camps suggests (Rawlence 2016; Porges 2017). There is also a presumption in the British sources that animals are objects, acted upon but not acting, bringing to mind Diana Wynne Jones's comment on the type of writing where 'Horses can be used like bicycles' (2004: 101). Interdisciplinary animal studies has a highly developed approach to animal agency that would call this instrumental understanding of animals into question, and offer a richer account of human and animal lives in the camp (Despret 2013).

Still, there is enough here to make a strong case that the history of Baquba was an animal history as well as a human one. This has implications for our understanding of other refugee camps, past and present. All camps are different, and not all refugees are pastoralists accompanied by their flocks—though some still are, as at the camps in Cameroon recently set up for refugees from the Central African Republic.³³ But wherever refugees are put in camps, there are animals. If we want to understand the lives that refugees live in camps, we need to look more closely at the animals living there too.

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³³ Personal communication from Helen Morris, UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service.

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